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## Framing Bersih 3.0: Online versus Traditional Mass Communication

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### Abstract

This study focused on news coverage on “Bersih 3.0” by *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini*. Frames can be divided into five dimensions which are responsibility, human interest, morality, conflict, and economic consequences. A total of 256 news articles were analyzed starting from 4 April to 4 May 2012 using content analysis method. MANOVA test was applied to scrutinize the differences of portrayal of frames by media and event. Overall, there were significant interaction effects based on the prominence portrayal of frames between two media in two different time periods. Responsibility frame was the most prominent frame in *Utusan Malaysia* during pre-event period compared to post-event period. But conflict frame became the most prominent frame during post-event period compared to pre-event period, likewise for *Malaysiakini*.

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### 1. Online and print media

The mass media are often regarded as an agent of the government as they seemingly carry government's aspiration in order to maintain the status quo. This situation is said particularly obvious during the general elections. News in mass media become important information to the reader and in turn becomes a source for them to think about when making decisions during elections [1]. The online media is said to have become the new major player in

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politics. The last Malaysia general election in March 2008 saw the failure of certain parties in utilizing this technology which is subsequently regarded as important and influential. According to Tremayne [2], bloggers are not just regarded as journalists, but also opinion leaders cum shapers nowadays.

Political participation through online media creates active audiences who are expecting to give feed backs, responses and also their views without any restrictions compared to traditional mass media. For example *Malaysiakini*, a news portal founded on 20 November 1999 has been widely accepted by the netizens as the source of most popular political news and information on Malaysia. Its inception mission is claimed to provide information to the public on recent issues in a way that is free and fair, as well as to display news articles that blocked by the main stream media.

The “Bersih 3.0” rally on 28 April 2012 at Dataran Merdeka Kuala Lumpur received wide coverage from both main stream and online media. It was a continuation of “Bersih” in 2007, which was a few months prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election; and “Bersih 2.0” in 2011. Both “Bersih 2.0” and “Bersih 3.0” are lauded by certain quarters as an attempt put forward by the non-governmental organizations to have a clean, transparent and fair 13<sup>th</sup> General Election.

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This paper scrutinized the Malay print and online media reports on this issue prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> General Election. With the focus on news coverage before and after the “Bersih 3.0” rally, the study examined how mainstream daily *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini* news portal framed the story. Media framing process with five generic frame dimensions developed by Semetko and Valkenburg[3] covering responsibility, human interest, morality, conflict, and economic consequences were applied in this research. Consequently, this study was to identify dimensions of frame that were most highlighted on both print and onlinemediaduring the periodof pre-andpost-rally.

## 2. Media framing studies

In political communication research, framing is often used to describe a phenomenon in which the messages are conveyed by the media to shape the way an individual evaluates and thinks about an issue. Both the mainstream media and online news portal play an important role in framing political issues such as the coverage of “Bersih 3.0” which is the focal issue in this study. To frame a story is to choose some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the form of text communication with a view to projecting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral judgment, and proposed solutions [4].

The study of media framing of political issues in Malaysia is not new. Chang, Fauziah, and Wan Amizah [5] look at the message framed by the former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad through his weblog *chedet.com*. Using framing theory, these researchers conducted empirical study on the former premier’s weblog content by using the measurements of five generic frame dimensions [3] to explain the framing phenomenon in the blog. The results show that both the target and language have an impact on frame-building process.

Zhou and Moy [6] find that online public opinion and mass media coverage affect each other. Their study uses framing theory to analyze the online discussion and media coverage of an incident in China. There are beyond two framing processes seen in this study of which how online discussion leads to building frames in the mass media; as well as how the framing in the mass media eventually leads to the formation of public opinion in online discussion.

## 3. Methodology

The present study emulated the framing researches with the adoption of five generic frame dimensions conducted by the main author and his associates. This can be found in Chang, Faridah, and Normah [7], Chang, Faridah, FuziahKartini, and Kho [8], Chang, Faridah, Fauziah, and Chew [9], Chang, Musa, and Fauziah [10], Chew, Fauziah, Faridah, and Chang [11], and Kho, Chew, Tan, and Chang [12]. Using quantitative content analysis method empirical data were collected to scrutinize the communication phenomenon. The five dimensions were used to measure:

- Responsibility frame: This frame highlights the government's (or an individual's; or group's) responsibility and ability in solving a particular problem (e.g. the news suggests that a certain level of government has the ability to alleviate the problem).
- Conflict frame: This frame highlights the conflict elements of the particular issue, for instance, argument between two parties (e.g. the news reflects disagreement between parties, individuals and/or group).
- Morality frame: Issues are examined through the morality lens by relating it to moral values or religious teachings (e.g. the news makes reference to morality, God and other religious tenets).
- Economic consequences frame: This frame reports an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region, or country (e.g. the news mentions the costs or degree or expenses involved).
- Human interest frame: This frame focuses on elements that could trigger an emotional impact on its readers (e.g. the news touches on the personal or private lives of the actor).

To measure the visibility of frames contained in a unit of analysis, 18 attribute statements from Semetko and Valkenburg[3] and Valkenburg, Semetko, and de Vreese [13] corresponding to the five generic frames were adopted. Coders were instructed to mark "yes" if they find the attribute statement on the whole applied to the unit of analysis under study. Otherwise, "no" is marked. Each "yes" carries 1 score, while "no" contributes nothing to the score board. The accumulated score for a particular frame was then averaged according to the numbers of attribute statements it had. The final score ranging from "0" to "1" would indicate the level of visibility of the frame, with "0" pointing towards non-visibility while "1" indicating full visibility. The validity and reliability of these attributed items had been tested thoroughly through the researches as mentioned above[3].

#### 4. Research findings

The unit of analysis in this study was the news articles concerning "Bersih 3.0" that published by *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini* from 4 April to 4 May 2012. The selection of news articles focused on the coverage of the reporting of the assembly of "Bersih 3.0" covering before and after the event. Based on the period under review, 256 news articles were identified. A total of 143 units identified in the *Utusan Malaysia*, while another 113 units from *Malaysiakini*. The results of content analysis are shown in Figure 1 and Table 1 to facilitate the comparison from the perspective of data studied during the period of this study.

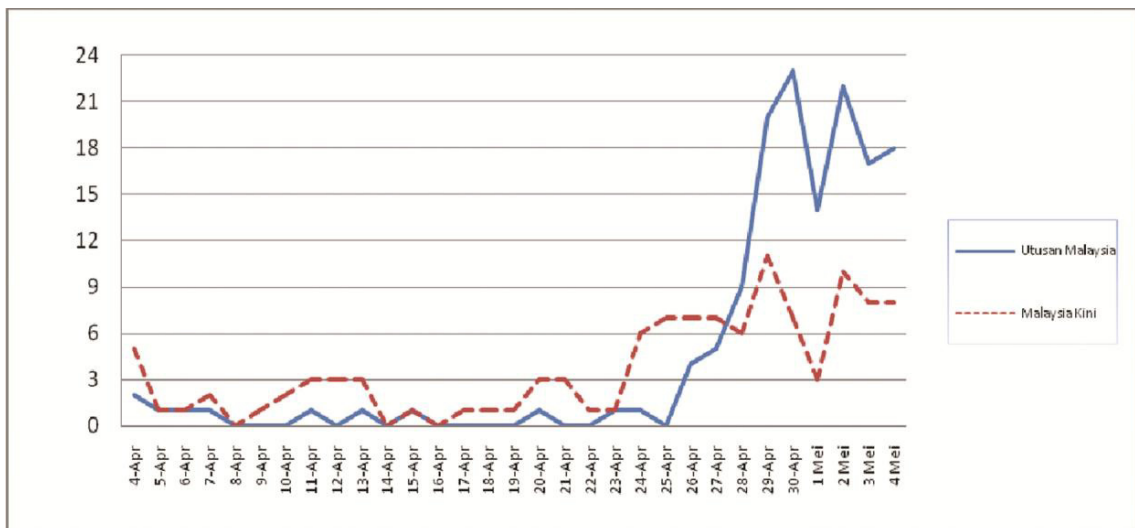


Fig. 1. Life cycle of news on the coverage of "Bersih 3.0"

Table 1 shows the study period and number of news articles of the media studied. The study was divided into two

periods of pre- and post-rally. The pre-rally period of *Utusan Malaysia* (4 April to 28 April 2012) yielded 29 units of article. In contrast, *Malaysiakini* with a shorter duration from 4 April to 27 April 2012 yielded 60 units for the pre-event. It is worth noting that the print media could only cover the story on the following day, in contrast with the instant reporting by online media. Within the shorter post-event period for *Utusan Malaysia*, from 29 April to 4 May 2012, this news paper displayed more articles with 114 units. While *Malaysiakini*, from 28 April to 4 May 2012, had only 53 units which were much lower than *Utusan Malaysia*.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation between media and event

| Media   |            | <i>Utusan Malaysia</i> (UM) | <i>Malaysiakini</i> (MK) |
|---------|------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Rally   | Pre-event  | 29 (20.3%)                  | 60 (53.1%)               |
|         | Post-event | 114 (79.7%)                 | 53 (46.9%)               |
| Overall |            | 143 (100%)                  | 113 (100%)               |

Table 2 displays the mean differences for the five dependent variables, in this case the five generic frame dimensions across the two independent variables which were media and event, and also the interaction between them. Responsibility frame was the most prominent frame projected by *Utusan Malaysia* with the  $M=.762$  ( $S.D.=.032$ ) followed by conflicts frame with  $M=.591$  ( $S.D.=.035$ ), then human interest frame  $M=.248$  ( $S.D.=.019$ ). Morality frame showed  $M=.217$  ( $S.D.=.028$ ) and lastly, economic consequences frame was the least prominent frame with the value  $M=.066$  ( $S.D.=.022$ ). Conflict frame was the most prominent frame for *Malaysiakini* with the mean score of  $M=.633$  ( $S.D.=.032$ ), followed by responsibility frame with the score  $M=.591$  ( $S.D.=.029$ ), then human interest frame with  $M=.291$  ( $S.D.=.017$ ), morality frame with  $M=.057$  ( $S.D.=.025$ ), and finally the economic consequences frame with  $M=.008$  ( $S.D.=.020$ ).

Table 2. Mean scores of main and interaction effects

|             | Responsibility | Human Interest | Conflict    | Morality    | Economic Consequences |
|-------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Media       |                |                |             |             |                       |
| UM          | .762 (.032)    | .248 (.019)    | .591 (.035) | .217 (.028) | .066 (.022)           |
| MK          | .591 (.029)    | .291 (.017)    | .633 (.032) | .057 (.025) | .008 (.020)           |
| Event       |                |                |             |             |                       |
| Pre-        | .719 (.035)    | .228 (.021)    | .547 (.038) | .180 (.030) | .014 (.024)           |
| Post-       | .634 (.026)    | .311 (.015)    | .677 (.028) | .095 (.022) | .060 (.017)           |
| Interaction |                |                |             |             |                       |
| UM*Pre      | .816 (.058)    | .207 (.034)    | .494 (.063) | .276 (.050) | .011 (.039)           |
| UM*Post     | .708 (.029)    | .289 (.017)    | .687 (.032) | .158 (.025) | .120 (.020)           |
| MK*Pre      | .622 (.040)    | .250 (.024)    | .600 (.044) | .083 (.035) | .017 (.027)           |
| MK*Post     | .560 (.043)    | .332 (.025)    | .667 (.047) | .031 (.037) | .000 (.000)           |

Values in parentheses represent standard deviations

Overall, findings showed *Utusan Malaysia* was higher than *Malaysiakini* in terms of the prominence of responsibility frame ( $M_{UM} = .762$ ,  $M_{MK} = .591$ ), morality frame ( $M_{UM} = .217$ ,  $M_{MK} = .057$ ), and economic consequences frame ( $M_{UM} = .066$ ,  $M_{MK} = .008$ ). On the other hand, *Malaysiakini* news portal projected higher prominence on humanity frame ( $M_{MK} = .291$ ,  $M_{UM} = .248$ ), and conflict frame ( $M_{MK} = .633$ ,  $M_{UM} = .591$ ). From the comparison of pre- and post-event of the “Bersih 3.0” rally, pre-event was found higher than post-event in two out of five frames which were responsibility frame ( $M_{Pre} = .719$ ,  $M_{Post} = .634$ ), and morality frame ( $M_{Pre} = .180$ ,  $M_{Post} = .095$ ). On the other hand, post-event was higher in terms of human interest frame ( $M_{Post} = .311$ ,  $M_{Pre} = .228$ ), conflict frame ( $M_{Post} = .677$ ,  $M_{Pre} = .547$ ), and economic consequences frame ( $M_{Post} = .060$ ,  $M_{Pre} = .014$ ).

Looking at the interaction effect of media and event, the four lowest rows in Table 2 refer to the mean scores of the five frames across the variables of the *Utusan Malaysia* newspaper and *Malaysiakini* news portal for the pre-event and post-event of “Bersih 3.0” rally. It was found that *Utusan Malaysia* in the study highlighted two frames

over the period of pre-event compared to post-event. These frames were the responsibility frame ( $M_{UM,Pre} = .816$ ,  $M_{UM,Post} = .708$ ) and morality frame ( $M_{UM,Pre} = .276$ ,  $M_{UM,Post} = .158$ ).

For *Utusan Malaysia* responsibility frame, pre-rally coverage showed that the government especially the Ministry of Home Affairs recommendations to avoid “Bersih 3.0” rally to be held at Dataran Merdeka, which is the central area of the capital city. As for example, in the article entitled “The rally should be conditional – Hishamuddin” showed that the Minister of Home Affairs indicated his responsibilities in handling this issue, such as giving guidelines to the “Bersih 3.0” rally organizers to ensure smooth rally. It saw a reduction of portrayal of responsibility frame from the mean score of .816 to .708, which was a difference by .108 point. For morality frame, an article entitled “Muslims remember not to be exploited” showed that the news article during the pre-event of “Bersih 3.0” rally reminded Muslims not to be influenced and used by certain parties for their political interests. It reduced .118 point from the mean score of .276 to .158 in the portrayal of morality frame.

After “Bersih 3.0” rally, conflict frame became more prominent in *Utusan Malaysia* ( $M_{UM,Post} = .687$ ,  $M_{UM,Pre} = .494$ ), followed by human interest frame ( $M_{UM,Post} = .289$ ,  $M_{UM,Pre} = .207$ ), and economic consequences frame ( $M_{UM,Post} = .120$ ,  $M_{UM,Pre} = .011$ ). For conflict frame, post-rally news coverage in the *Utusan Malaysia* mostly blamed the “Bersih 3.0” organizers especially the opposition party for the chaos that arise. The article entitled “The leader of the opposition incite, participants paid”, dated 29 April 2012 had proven this claim. It justified the huge increase of portrayal of conflict frame from the mean score of .494 to .687, which was a difference by .193 point.

Meanwhile, for human interest frame, an article in *Utusan Malaysia* entitled “Injured policemen were visited” showed a caring and sympathetic attitude of the government, especially when the Prime Minister visited the injured policemen during “Bersih 3.0” rally. Besides, in the article entitled “Ambiga, Anwar suspected” during the post-event, it showed that the news display of people deemed responsible of the chaos. This was in line with increment from .207 to .289, a difference of .082 point. While for the economic consequences, as an example in an article entitled “Sale of business in the capital city fall dramatically” and “Bersih 3.0 rally cause taxi drivers income affected” indicates financial loss as a result from the “Bersih 3.0” rally. *Utusan Malaysia* demonstrated an increment of .109 point and made its mean score from .011 to .120 for the economic consequences frame, which was not the case by *Malaysiakini* that eliminated this frame  $M_{MK,Post} = .000$  from  $M_{MK,Pre} = .017$ .

Same as its counterpart, *Malaysiakini* news portal showed that pre-event were more prominent than post-event for responsibility frame ( $M_{MK,Pre} = .622$ ,  $M_{MK,Post} = .560$ ) and morality frame ( $M_{MK,Pre} = .083$ ,  $M_{MK,Post} = .031$ ). For responsibility frame, as in the article entitled “Bersih 3.0: Clean first, then make a new election” showed that “Bersih 3.0” organizers desire for transparency in the forthcoming general election. Morality frame was described in the article entitled “Bersih 3.0: Zahid said Ministers are ignorant and arrogant”, whereby it told the readers how to behave. The economic consequences frame was shown in the article entitled “The taxi driver willing to bring ‘Bersih 3.0’ participants” tells the willingness of taxi driver to take participants to “Bersih 3.0” rally if the rally was to be held at Stadium Merdeka. The portrayal of both responsibility and morality frames were decreased moderately in *Malaysiakini* by .062 and .052 points respectively. As mentioned above, after the event, there was no highlight of economic consequences frame in this online news portal after the rally.

On the other hand, during the post-event of “Bersih 3.0” rally, *Malaysiakini* highlighted more on conflict frame ( $M_{MK,Post} = .667$ ,  $M_{MK,Pre} = .600$ ) and human interest frame ( $M_{MK,Post} = .332$ ,  $M_{MK,Pre} = .250$ ). For conflict frame during post-event, as in the article entitled “PAS youth have evidence that police battered participant” and “PKR wants Najib be responsible to the attack allegations” show that news in *Malaysiakini* exhibited disagreement between the opposition and the government. In addition, the opposition blamed the government after the happening of “Bersih 3.0” rally. This was in line with the increment of .067 point, but which was much lower than the .193 point of *Utusan Malaysia*. Besides, human interest frame displayed as in the article entitled “A journalists has suffered for a broken rib when he covered ‘Bersih 3.0’ rally” indicated the visual information to generate feelings of sympathy and compassion. This justified the increase of .082 point for human interest frame in *Malaysiakini*, which was just exactly the same amount of increment for the same frame in *Utusan Malaysia*.

Comparison between *Utusan Malaysia* newspaper and *Malaysiakini* news portal showed that *Utusan Malaysia* promoted heavily on responsibility frame during pre-event with the mean score  $M_{UM,Pre} = .816$ , which was higher than *Malaysiakini* with  $M_{MK,Pre} = .622$ . While conflict frame was highlighted during the post-event with the mean score  $M_{UM,Post} = .687$  for *Utusan Malaysia* and  $M_{MK,Post} = .667$  for *Malaysiakini*. Human interest frame was highlighted after the event with a higher score for *Malaysiakini* with  $M_{MK,Post} = .332$  as compared to *Utusan Malaysia* with  $M_{UM,Post} = .289$ . While morality frame was highlighted before the event by *Utusan Malaysia* with  $M_{UM,Pre} = .276$  as compared to *Malaysiakini* with  $M_{MK,Pre} = .083$ . Economic consequences frame was highlighted

during the post-event with a significant higher score for *Utusan Malaysia* with  $M_{UM.Post} = .120$  as compared to pre-event with  $M_{UM.Pre} = .011$ . Meanwhile, *Malaysiakini* showed a low score before the event with  $M_{MK.Pre} = .017$  and totally eliminated it after the rally which was  $M_{MK.Post} = .000$ .

Table 3. Tests of significant differences of mean scores

| Frame                 |             | SS     | df  | MS    | F     | p      |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------|-----|-------|-------|--------|
| Responsibility        | Media       | 1.482  | 1   | 1.482 | 15.42 | .000** |
|                       | Event       | .371   | 1   | .371  | 3.86  | .051   |
|                       | Interaction | .027   | 1   | .027  | .28   | .597   |
|                       | Error       | 24.215 | 252 | .096  |       |        |
| Human Interest        | Media       | .093   | 1   | .093  | 2.79  | .096   |
|                       | Event       | .344   | 1   | .344  | 10.31 | .001** |
|                       | Interaction | .000   | 1   | .000  | .00   | .992   |
|                       | Error       | 8.411  | 252 | .033  |       |        |
| Conflict              | Media       | .092   | 1   | .092  | .08   | .372   |
|                       | Event       | .855   | 1   | .855  | 7.42  | .007** |
|                       | Interaction | .202   | 1   | .202  | 1.75  | .187   |
|                       | Error       | 29.046 | 252 | .115  |       |        |
| Morality              | Media       | 1.291  | 1   | 1.291 | 17.82 | .000** |
|                       | Event       | .366   | 1   | .366  | 5.05  | .025*  |
|                       | Interaction | .055   | 1   | .055  | .77   | .383   |
|                       | Error       | 18.260 | 252 | .072  |       |        |
| Economic Consequences | Media       | .167   | 1   | .167  | 3.79  | .053   |
|                       | Event       | .107   | 1   | .107  | 2.42  | .121   |
|                       | Interaction | .198   | 1   | .198  | 4.50  | .035*  |
|                       | Error       | 11.119 | 252 | .044  |       |        |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Further to the above descriptive analyses, Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) test was conducted to ascertain significant differences of frame portrayal within and between the variables of media and event. MANOVA test results in the Table 3 shows that there were main effects of media on two out of the five dependent variables in this study which were responsibility frame [ $F(1,252) = 15.42, p < .01$ ] and morality frame [ $F(1,252) = 17.82, p < .01$ ]. Which mean *Utusan Malaysia* projected higher responsibility frame and morality frame than *Malaysiakini*. The results showed that there were no significant differences in human interest frame, conflict frame, and economic consequences frame for both print and online media.

While the results of MANOVA test on the independent variable of event revealed that there were main effects on three out of five frames which were human interest frame [ $F(1,252) = 31.10, p < .01$ ], conflict frame [ $F(1,252) = 7.42, p < .01$ ] and morality frame [ $F(1,252) = 5.05, p < .05$ ]. Both human interest frame and conflict frame were found to be significantly more salient after the “Bersih 3.0” rally vis-à-vis before the event. On the other hand, morality became significantly less prominent after the rally. Attention could have been diverted to the two former frames, i.e. human interest frame and conflict frame. The results also showed that there were no significant differences in terms of responsibility frame and economic consequences frame for the comparison of pre- and post-event. Finally, the results of analysis on interaction effects of the two independent variables of media\*event indicated that only one frame which was economic consequences frame exhibited significant differences [ $F(1,252) = 4.50, p < .05$ ]. As described in the above section, economic consequences frame was highlighted more by *Utusan Malaysia* after the event as compared to before the rally. Although *Malaysiakini* showed a low score before the event it eliminated this frame totally after the rally.

## 5. Discussion

Generally, the news on “Bersih 3.0” rally had received wide spread coverage by media in Malaysia. However, the news framing pattern of the print and online media practitioners was different. Both the media under studied had



projected different framing dimensions in their news coverage of the events before and after the "Bersih 3.0" rally. In *Utusan Malaysia*, the words that often used in the report were not in favour to the "Bersih 3.0" organizers such as riot, incitement, illegal, insubordinate, outrageous and extreme behaviours. On top of that, the police force, which included Federal Reserve Unit, action in using water cannons was reported as to calm the situation and avoid the riots to become more violent.

On the contrary, *Malaysiakini* also provided extensive coverage on the issue but slanted towards different directions. "Bersih 3.0" was reported this online news portal as very well received and welcomed by the people. The incidents during and after the rally that revealed by *Malaysiakini* were significantly different from *Utusan Malaysia*. The stories about the demonstration were slanted towards attacking the government as the source of chaos.

Comparing both media, the responsibility frame was mostly used in highlighting "Bersih 3.0" issue by *Utusan Malaysia* before the rally especially coverage on the Home Affairs Ministry recommendations to the organizers of "Bersih 3.0" not to hold the event at Dataran Merdeka. This was in contrast to news portal *Malaysiakini*, which promoted more on conflict frame, especially after the rally. Example as in the articles of this Malay online news portal: "PAS youth claimed there was evidence that participants were beaten by police" and "PKR said Najib should be liable for those attacks" which showed the strong disagreement between the opposition and the government. Obviously, the opposition blamed the government after the assembly of "Bersih 3.0" for causing the riot.

## 6. Conclusion

Generally, it can be concluded that the difference between print and online media results are due to the nature of the media itself. Print media are deemed to be more conservative and mainstream, and thus seemingly pro-establishment. On the other hand, the online media are perceived to be more interactive with more rooms for discussion and thus seemingly more anti-establishment and provocative. *Utusan Malaysia* always displays heavily on government's efforts to address and resolve any issues, particularly in combating accusations for causing the riot. In addition, this mainstream newspaper also shows disagreement between political parties and individuals who are associated with organizing any rallies. Meanwhile, *Malaysiakini* has been giving ample rooms to the opposition to blast the government, in this "Bersih 3.0" issue, for poorly managing the 22 recommendations to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Electoral Reform which was passed by the House without debate.

It can be seen that the coverage of news on "Bersih 3.0" by *Malaysiakini* differs from *Utusan Malaysia*. Both of these media have differing perspectives in viewing and representing the incident of "Bersih 3.0" according to their editorial policy. There is a significant assertion of frames in the news report on the issue by the *Utusan Malaysia* newspaper and the *Malaysiakini* news portal. Overall, this study found that there is a relationship between politics and communication where the government and political elites use the media to disseminate information and influence the people on what and how to think about an issue. Seeing the progress of the new media in the country, the 18 attributes of frame by Semetko and Valkenburg [3] which were applied in this study can also be used to measure the framing of other issues in all aspects such as perception on public safety and nation-building.

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